

## What Questions Need We Ask about Staff Participation?

**What characteristics of curriculum development activities do teachers themselves identify as important in terms of improving their work with children and youth?**

**WHEN TEACHERS** express their reactions to curriculum development activities available to them, a number of questions about present practice in staff participation arise. Until recently the opinions of teachers, the persons closest to the curriculum in action, have not been considered. And yet, by definition curriculum development activities are planned activities approved by the administration in which teachers and other staff members participate for the purpose of improving learning opportunities provided for pupils under the guidance and direction of the school. Only as schools and school systems have become concerned about lack of change in classroom practice resulting from staff participation in curriculum development activities has teacher opinion been probed.

Curriculum development activities have been considered most effective when groups of teachers and other educators have worked together on prob-

lems which they face together. Programs which might be city-wide or limited to one school building have provided a range of possible activities including general staff meetings and building meetings; departmental meetings; grade-level meetings and subject-area meetings; classroom observation and evaluation; intervisitation; attendance at institutes, workshops and conferences; committee membership for the study of special problems; writing curriculum guides, courses of study or resource units; attendance at in-service courses under school system auspices; studying written communications; membership on a curriculum coordinating council; consultation with principal, central-office staff member or outside resource person; demonstration; use of professional reading and other adult learning materials; use of school-sponsored television or radio, and so forth.

Yet, a number of studies conducted recently in school systems which have been working over a period of years in organized programs of staff participation in curriculum change have revealed that participants have often merely become more facile in discussing child needs, rather than in solving some problems re-

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*CATHERINE M. BRODERICK is curriculum consultant, Community Schools, Fort Wayne, Indiana. BARBARA T. MASON is assistant principal, George M. Davis Jr. School, New Rochelle, New York.*

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lating to needs. Both Doll (1) and Dropkin (2) have reported that many teachers involved in in-service study over a period of years showed evidence that they had acquired additional factual knowledge about child growth and development but continued using classroom practices which were not in harmony with the new knowledge. Recently, questions have been raised about the depth of the problems on which teachers work. Are teachers receiving adequate help in delineating problems as well as in solving problems? What characteristics of curriculum development activities do teachers themselves identify as important in terms of improving their work with children and youth?

### A Beginning Research Study

Choosing this latter problem, a research team<sup>1</sup> from Teachers College, Columbia University devised a questionnaire as one way of finding out teacher opinion. If teachers considered some curriculum development activities more helpful than others, perhaps there were characteristics common to activities chosen as most helpful and characteristics common to activities chosen as least helpful.

Perhaps the persons responsible for coordinating curriculum development activities might plan to include more preferred characteristics. Therefore, the questionnaire asked teachers to identify the curriculum development activity which was most helpful to them in providing improved learning opportunities in their classrooms and what curriculum development activity was least helpful, to indicate the presence of 60 possible characteristics and to indicate which of the characteristics present were reasons

for choice of an activity as most helpful or least helpful.

The characteristics were short action statements based upon selected assumptions about staff participation found commonly in recent literature in education. Most of the assumptions were related to the major aspects of the task of curriculum improvement as developed by Mackenzie (3) and were grouped under the categories of: *objectives of working, evaluation, process of working, communications, working arrangements,* and *maintenance of public understanding.* Additional assumptions, grouped under the category called *substance,* were concerned with the idea that curriculum programs be developed deliberately so that the sights of participants be raised. It was thought that *substance* was evidenced through the introduction of research in curriculum study, in group dynamics and in the nature of learning; through study of the role of the school in a changing democratic society; and through the development of new insights into the increasing body of knowledge which is becoming available for man's use in the second half of the twentieth century.

In order that teachers might have freedom to respond beyond any limitations which the 60 characteristics might impose, a series of open-ended questions was included:

- What reasons other than those checked did you have for selecting this activity as the [most, least] helpful?
- If you had been in charge of this [most helpful, least helpful] activity, how would you have improved it?
- What changes have you made in your classroom as a result of taking part in this [most helpful] activity?
- What next steps would you recommend as a follow-up to this [most helpful] activity?

Of the 244 elementary school and secondary school respondents in three met-

<sup>1</sup> Catherine M. Broderick, Robert Levin and Barbara T. Mason.

ropolitan New York City school systems more than half were women, more than half of the group were married and more than half had two or fewer dependents. Most of the teachers had taught six years or more but had been assigned to their present school five years or less. Over half of the sample had a Master's degree or beyond and half of the entire group had received the most recent degree since 1952. Most teachers had participated in curriculum development activities during the three years previous to the study. Most felt that their building faculty had been doing a good job teaching and most considered themselves moderately active in curriculum development activities. Most considered curriculum development activities an integral part of the job of a teacher, indicated that other people rather than materials or experience were the greatest source of help in improving classroom work with children, and said they welcomed additional professional help.

Some teachers in each school system had participated in all 20 activities listed in the questionnaire. However, the range of participation was from 243 attending faculty meetings to 42 making use of school-sponsored television or radio. Although attending faculty meetings was the activity most frequently indicated, only 10 teachers selected it as most helpful. In the total sample, elementary teachers selected grade level meetings as most helpful and secondary teachers selected departmental meetings as most helpful. However, there was no one activity designated by even half of those who had participated in it as being most helpful. General staff meetings were designated as least helpful by teachers in the three systems. Activities in which teachers participated in groups were designated by more teachers as most help-

ful than were activities in which teachers participated as individuals, such as conferences with principal or supervisor, or studying written communications. Individual activities, selected as most helpful, were more often indicated by teachers from the system which had a larger percentage of less experienced teachers.

All sixty characteristics received some mention as being present. The following, listed in order of frequency, were said to be present most often in an activity selected as most helpful. The first three of these characteristics were most often indicated as a reason for choosing an activity as most helpful.

We examined our classroom practices.

We participated in discussions.

The problem was important to me.

We considered a range of learning opportunities.

We understood the limits within which we had freedom to operate.

We considered the use of instructional materials.

I was required to be a part.

Objectives were studied in terms of behavioral change.

Learnings considered were related to grades before and after mine.

We considered improving teacher-pupil relationships.

I saw the relationship of this problem to a bigger problem.

The following characteristics considered desirable by the research team were indicated as present in a most helpful activity by less than 25 percent of the total sample. In this activity:

A consultant was present.

A consultant conferred with teachers.

The purpose was study, not action.

A member of our group served on the curriculum council.

Decisions made gained community support.

Lay persons were a part of the activity.

I gained ideas from lectures.

I observed in the classrooms of others.

We carried out an action research study.

Our leader proposed a method for beginning our study.

A leader directed our attention to curriculum theory.

Less than half of the respondents indicated an activity which was least helpful. Some of the characteristics indicated most frequently as present by teachers who designated a least helpful activity were:

I was required to be a part of the activity. (Only one teacher in every six who indicated this characteristic present in a least helpful activity indicated that this was a reason for choice.)

Only teachers were in this activity.

A small number carried responsibility.

I participated in discussions.

The activity met once.

We had refreshments.

We kept written records.

We examined our classroom practices.

A teacher was chairman.

The leader presented his solution to the problem.

The only characteristics designated by as many as 20 teachers as reasons for selecting an activity as least helpful were:

A member of the central office staff decided the topic for discussion.

A small group carried responsibility.

The leader presented his solution to the problem.

Although the questionnaire is only now in the process of being validated, data received have led the research team to raise such questions as:

Does the fact that staff participation is voluntary or compulsory really matter?

Is it necessary to provide a large number of curriculum development activities to meet effectively the needs of all teachers?

Do inexperienced teachers need a differ-

ent type of curriculum development activity from more experienced teachers? Do inexperienced teachers receive more help individually (observations by principal, work with helping teachers) while perhaps experienced teachers receive more help from group activities?

What are some skills which possibly need to be developed in a school or school system in order to work effectively with a consultant or other outside helper?

What are some effective types of written records for curriculum development activities? How might they be used for mutual benefit within the group as well as for information to those concerned who are outside the group?

Further studies might be designed to investigate such areas as the influence of colleagues on teachers views toward curriculum development; teachers views of the activeness of their building faculties as compared with views of principals and curriculum coordinators; differences in views about curriculum development activities of teachers who have been graduated from multi-purpose higher education institutions as compared with teachers who have been graduated from teacher-preparatory institutions.

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